



LEWIS & CLARK CITY-COUNTY Health Department

1930 Ninth Avenue
Helena, MT 59601
PH: 406.4HEALTH or 406.443.2584
Fax: 406.457.8990

Public Health column for IR

February 2012

Contact: Melanie Reynolds, Health Officer, 406-443-2584

Gayle Shirley, Communications Coordinator, 406-457-8908

Young Adults Face Unique Set of Health Challenges

Remember those years from age 18 to 29? When you were bright, eager, strong, healthy, and ready to charge into adulthood full speed ahead?

Faced with charting a career, making a home, and starting a family, your health was probably among the least of your concerns.

And yet, young adulthood may arguably be one of the most critical periods of life when it comes to long-term health. As parental influence fades, young people begin making decisions for themselves – decisions that can and will affect their current and future health behaviors and status.

With their newfound independence, young adults are at a crossroads: They can choose to establish healthy eating and exercise habits. They can develop or continue a habit of regular preventive health care. They can take responsibility for their sexual health, and they can resist abusing alcohol, tobacco, and drugs.

Or not.

Access to Health Care

As young adults make these difficult choices, they face some unique challenges. Among them are poverty and lack of health insurance, which can stymie their access to health care. So, too, can a lack of experience with and information about how to find appropriate care.

Young adults are more likely than their elders to be employed in low-level positions, often by businesses that don't offer health insurance. Many in this age group don't work full-time, whether because jobs are scarce or they're busy pursuing a higher education.

As a result, 44.6 percent of 18- to 29-year-old Montanans in 2010 had a household income of less than \$25,000 a year. Thirty-five percent had no health insurance.

Just figuring out how to find a primary care provider can be a challenge for young adults who've always relied on parents, guardians, and pediatricians to manage their medical care for them. The

National Institutes of Health (NIH) offer some tips on choosing a doctor at <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/001939.htm>

A recent change to federal law may help to improve access to health insurance for this age group. The Affordable Care Act allows parents to keep children on their health insurance plan until the child turns 26, even if the child is married and not living at home. Previously, insurance companies could remove enrolled children usually at age 19, sometimes older for full-time students.

Risky Business

Young adults face other age-specific health issues. For example, 18 to 29 is the prime period of childbearing, and childbirth inherently involves potential health risks.

This can also be a critical time for identifying mental health problems. According to a 2005 study reported in the Archives of General Psychiatry, three-quarters of all lifetime cases of diagnosable mental disorders begin by age 24.

Research by the NIH shows that brain development and the improvement in judgment that comes with it continues beyond age 18. The period from roughly age 15 to 25 is when people are most likely to engage in risky behaviors, so is it any surprise that this age group is also more likely to face the unhealthy, and even deadly, consequences?

The leading causes of death among 18- to 29-year-olds are unintentional injuries (primarily motor vehicle accidents) and suicide, according to Montana Vital Statistics. Drinking and driving has proven to be a particularly deadly combination in this state.

HHS points out that young adults have the highest rate of injury-related emergency room visits of all age groups.

Snapshot of Health

Each year, the nation takes a snapshot of its citizens' health through a telephone survey called the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS). In Montana, the survey is conducted by the state Department of Public Health and Human Services. The results are based on the self-reporting of survey participants, who represent a cross-section of state residents.

Results of the 2010 survey (see table) reveal just how 18- to 29-year-old Montanans are faring when it comes to making good health decisions. They also show that, despite their newfound legal status, young adults can still use our guidance in building a strong foundation for a healthy future.

To paraphrase Ben Franklin, an ounce of 25-year-old prevention is worth a pound of 60-year-old cure.

Selected Health Indicators Among Montanans 18 to 29 Years of Age, 2010

Health Indicator	
Couldn't afford to get needed health care in previous year	16.5%
Currently smoke cigarettes	26.4%
Currently use smokeless tobacco	8.6%
Engaged in binge drinking in previous month	24.9%
Drinking and driving in previous month	6.1%
Do not always wear a seat belt	36.6%
Overweight or obese (Body Mass Index 25+)	45.9%
No leisure time physical activity in previous month	14.1%
Eat less than recommended 5 servings of fruits and vegetables a day	75.6%

2010 Montana Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System